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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a rationale for making social action a major goal of elementary and secondary school social studies education. In addition, it describes social action models, suggests social action approaches appropriate for students at various grade levels, and reviews literature on social action by public school students. Social action is interpreted as any attempt by an individual or group to effect change in the social or political environment. The author recommends that social action within the realm of social studies should be consistent with rationality and human dignity, should involve consideration of issues involved in a particular problem and examination of alternative courses of action, and should help students understand how to participate intelligently and responsibly in a democratic society. Three social action models are described. For each model, steps are outlined to help students identify a problem, collect and analyze data, discuss various solutions, take appropriate action, and evaluate results of that action. Twelve general means of taking social action are suggested, including circulating and signing petitions, interviewing people involved in the problem, presenting programs to civic and church groups, and collecting and sending money to causes and organizations. Instances of social action for the period 1929 to 1980 are outlined in tabular form by problem, school, location, action, and bibliographic reference. Among the approximately 90 actions outlined are neighborhood clean-up campaigns, surveys of pollution and litter, creation of a solarized heating plant in a nature center greenhouse, and a school-wide fund drive to collect food for indigent families. (DB)

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SOCIAL ACTION AS AN OBJECTIVE OF SOCIAL STUDIES INSTRUCTION

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SOCIAL ACTION AS AN OBJECTIVE OF SOCIAL STUDIES INSTRUCTION

During the past decade, the number of references in the literature to social action has steadily increased. Among the educators who have advocated including social action experiences in the social studies program or who have described social action models are Curtis (1974), Banks (1974, p. 13), Hanna, Potter, and Reynolds (1973), Jarolimek (1970, 1972), Newmann (1975), and Ochoa and Manson (1972). Most recently, social action was presented in an NCSS position paper on "Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines" as an important component of the social studies program (Ad Hoc Committee on Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines, 1979). The purpose of this paper is to present a rationale for social action, to describe appropriate social action models and legitimate means available to students for taking social action, and to report instances of social action by public school students gleaned from the writings that comprise the literature in this area.

Social Action Defined

Social action is generally interpreted to mean any attempt by an individual or group to effect change in the social or political environment (Oliver & Newmann, 1972, p. 3). The NCSS position statement succinctly described social action as the "application of knowledge, thinking, and commitment in the social arena" (Ad Hoc Committee, 1979). According to Jarolimek (1972) and Ochoa and Manson (1972), implied within the concept of social action is a commitment to behavior that is consistent with the norms of rationality and human dignity. That is, a careful consideration of the issues involved in a particular problem and the thoughtful examination of alternative courses of action should precede any activities designed to influence public policy decisions.

Rationale

Social Action: An Objective of Social Studies

Although most references to social action are found in articles and books published during the past decade, social action is not a new concept in social studies. Articles advocating social action as an objective of social studies have occurred--though somewhat infrequently--in the literature for at least 40 years (e.g., Burr, 1950; Engle, 1949, pp. 147-148, 1950; Gross, 1956; Maloff, 1950; Russell, 1954; Sayers & Madden, 1959, p. 7; Telford & Stewart, 1947; Whitney, 1940), and instances of social action taken by public school students have been reported in major education journals since 1938 (see Table 1). Interest in social action appeared to wane, however, during the 1960's when a multitude of new social studies curricula were produced that for the most part attempted to provide instruction and practice in the structures of the various academic disciplines. The commitment of many social studies educators to the scientific-descriptive model (described by, among others, Fenton, 1967, and Massialas and Cox, 1966) that followed the Woods Hole Conference and the publication of The Process of Education (Bruner, 1960) resulted in programs that encouraged students to investigate topics and problems in much the same manner as the social scientist. Such an approach was not likely to conclude in social action experiences (Johns, 1970). As the decade drew to a close, however, the foundations of some of the new programs were being challenged.

In some instances, criticism of the discipline-oriented curricula came from unexpected quarters. In early 1970, for example, many members of the academic community were taken unawares by an article by Bruner in the Saturday Review in which he examined the events of the previous decade and concluded that the school should give attention to the study of controversial problems. He argued that in order to introduce relevance into the curriculum problem-

solving skills should be given an opportunity to develop through the inclusion in the social studies program--and other school programs as well--of student investigations of such "inherently passionate" problems as racism, crime, war and aggression, and problems pertaining to marriage and the family.

The following year, Bruner reiterated this thesis in a second article, this time in the Phi Delta Kappan (1971). He referred to the inadequacy of the prevailing system for educating minority groups, to the new romanticism of Illich and Goodman, and to the "despair" felt by many of those who had placed their faith in the curriculum reform programs of the period. Bruner's article described how, as the decade wore on, he had slowly moved away from the position he had adopted as a result of the Woods Hole Conference until presently he had reached the point where he seriously questioned the adequacy of the new curricula for meeting the needs of the existing conditions in school and society.

About the same time, Jarolimek (1970), in an article published in The Journal of Geography, expressed a similar concern for the inclusion of contemporary problems in the curriculum, but he extended Bruner's argument to social action. The intent of curriculum developers had been to preserve the integrity of the academic disciplines by providing students with a knowledge of the concepts, generalizations, and modes of inquiry of history and the social sciences, and thus improve the quality of those courses taught under the rubric social studies. Unfortunately, Jarolimek contended, the new social studies curricula might have served to further alienate students by reinforcing their concerns about the irrelevancy of the educational system. As a result, he suggested that the new thrust of social studies should be away from the conventional social sciences and toward applying what is learned in school to social action outside the school.

Jarolimek (1972) continued his argument in favor of encouraging social

action experiences in the social studies program in his Presidential Address at the 51st Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies. He drew support for his position from the "NCSS Guidelines for the Social Studies" (NCSS Committee on Guidelines, 1971) which proclaimed social participation--interpreted by Jarolimek as being "some degree of activism" in social affairs outside the classroom--as a legitimate and important part of social studies instruction. Jarolimek's belief that the democratic tradition is maintained by citizens taking an active part in public affairs caused him to conclude that preparing students for intelligent involvement was a primary function of the educational system. He agreed with the view implied in the "Guidelines": Students learn to participate through participation.

The position taken by Jarolimek and the members of the NCSS Committee on Guidelines was reflected in the report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Committee on Assessing the Progress of Education, 1972), in which participation in democratic civic improvement was identified as a major goal of citizenship education (pp. 24-29). Five specific sets of objectives comprised this goal. These were the following:

A. Believe that each person's civic behavior is important, and convey this belief to others.

B. Favor organized civic action where it is needed.

C. Actively work for civic improvement.

D. Participate in local, state, and national governmental processes.

E. Apply democratic procedures effectively in small groups.

In recent years, Newmann, presently one of the foremost proponents of social action experiences in the social studies program, argued that preparing students to exert influence in public affairs is justified on the grounds that such preparation is in accord with the general educational objective of

"environmental competence" (1975, pp. 12-40). Environmental competence was defined by Newmann to be the "ability to engage in behavior that leads to one's intended consequences in the environment" (1975, p. 19). Adopting a position similar to Jarolimek's, he believed that neither traditional social studies curricula nor programs that encourage the rational discussion of public issues were adequate to achieve this goal. Traditional curricula, Newmann contended, tend not to be concerned with matters germane to the students' exercise of influence, and examinations of public issues tend to stop short of dealing with ways to implement decisions that result from student analyses (1975, pp. 23-24).

Social Action: Preparation for Participation

In addition to Jarolimek and Newmann, a number of social studies educators have presented persuasive arguments in favor of providing students with instruction in social action. Essentially, these arguments have focused on the notion of participatory democracy: They have their basis in the premise that an active, involved, and concerned citizenry is fundamental to the democratic state (see, e.g., Curtis, 1977; Newmann, Bertocci, & Landsness, 1977; Sayers & Madden, 1959, p. 75). Related to arguments that stress the importance of citizen participation are the comments of educators who have contended that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for rational, effective participation may best be developed within the context of social studies programs that provide students with opportunities to take action on problems, should they decide to do so (Gillespie & Mehlinger, 1972; Ochoa & Manson, 1972; Pitkin, 1960; Simon & Harmin, 1964). The need to involve children in democratic participation at an early age was emphasized by both Thomas and Brubaker (1971, pp. 323-324) and the NCSS Committee on Guidelines for the Social Studies (1971).

Beyond being an objective of social studies instruction and a means for preparing students for civic participation, social action experiences are purported

to favorably influence students' self-perceptions, particularly their feelings of "worth" and "significance" (Fantini & Weinstein, 1972; Simon & Harmin, 1964). And, it has been suggested that a sense of political efficacy--along with increased interest in community affairs--may result from social action experiences (Banks, 1974, p. 508; Fantini & Weinstein, 1972; Gillespie & Mehlinger, 1972; Newmann, 1975, pp. 12-40).

Social Action Models

There is a general consensus among those who write in this area that social action experiences will most likely occur within the context of student examinations of contemporary problems. A number of models for including social action as an essential component of such studies has been suggested in the literature (e.g., Banks, 1974, p. 497; Curtis, 1974; Engle, 1949, pp. 147-148; Hanna, Potter, & Reynolds, 1973, p. 162; Meier, Cleary, & Davis, 1952, pp. 338-343; Newmann, Bertocci, & Landsness, 1977; Simon, 1969, 1970; Wilen & Patton, 1976). The three models described here were synthesized from these suggestions.

Model A

1. Identification and selection of a particular problem to be studied.
2. Formulation of appropriate hypotheses that suggest reasons for the existence of the problem and/or serve as guidelines to the inquiry.
3. Collection of relevant data.
4. Analysis of the data by evaluating the reliability of the sources, distinguishing between fact and fiction, distinguishing among statements of facts, opinions, and values, and drawing inferences from facts.
5. Acceptance, rejection, or modification of the hypotheses.
6. Discussion concerning the need to take action on the problem.
7. Identification of legitimate courses of action for protesting the existence of the problem or for suggesting possible programs for the remediation of the problem.

Model A (cont'd)

8. Identification of the possible consequences of each course of action.

9. Taking whatever action is considered by the students to be necessary and appropriate.

10. Evaluation of the action.

Model B

1. Exploring the situation, casting about for insight into the problem, offering plausible hypotheses to explain the situation.

2. Identifying the issue or defining the problem in terms of the conflicting values which operate to block the resolution of the problem.

3. Identifying possible courses of action and determining the probable consequences of each.

4. Determining what information is needed to understand the problem and seeking the required facts.

5. Identifying the cultural values which are involved in a decision.

6. Evaluating each of the possible courses of action and choosing the preferred.

Model C

1. Defining the problem

   a. What is the ideal situation here?
   b. Just what is wrong?
   c. What, then, is the problem?

2. Discovering the facts

   a. What caused the problem?
   b. What measures have been taken in the past and in other places, and with what success?
   c. Why were some measures successful?
   d. Why did some measures fail?

3. Listing the alternative solutions

4. Stating the best solution

   a. Will this solve the problem?
   b. Will this solution create other problems?
   c. Why have others reached different solutions?
   d. Are we willing to have this solution apply to us if need be?

Model C (cont'd)

5. Making the decision to take action

   a. Should we tell others about our conclusions?
   b. What are the best ways to do so?

6. Taking action

   a. What action shall we take?
   b. How shall we take it?
   c. How will we evaluate it?

Means of Taking Socal Action

A variety of ways to take action following the examination of a contemporary problem is available to students. Among the means most frequently mentioned in articles and textbooks are the following:

1. circulating and signing petitions
2. interviewing and confronting people involved in the problem
3. attempting to influence public opinion (e.g., speaking before the PTA, the Chamber of Commerce)
4. presenting programs to civic and church groups (e.g., panel discussions, plays, illustrated lectures)
5. writing letters to newspapers, mayor and council, members of state and federal legislatures
6. organizing a cleanup day
7. participating in election campaigns, working with political parties, urging people to vote, etc.
8. working with civil rights groups
9. circulating leaflets
10. collecting and sending money to causes and organizations
11. demonstrating
12. holding community meetings

Criteria to assist students in selecting appropriate courses of action have been described by a number of educators (e.g., Banks, 1974, p. 510; Engle, 1949, p. 148; Jarolimek, 1972; Meier, Cleary, & Davis, 1952, p. 342; Simon, 1970, p. 64). In particular, students are cautioned that actions should be consistent with a democratic commitment to human dignity and equality, and that actions which are irresponsible or illegal must be discouraged.

Instances of Social Action

A number of instances of social action by public school students have been reported in the literature. Table 1 contains a list of such instances. These examples were located by a search of references listed in Education Index for the period 1929-1980 and a computer search of the ERIC files.

TABLE 1 Reported Instances of Social Action Taken by Public School Students[a]

Reference	Location	School[b]	Problem Topic[c]	Action Taken
Fields (1938, p. 165)	New York City	s	Citizenship	advised and assisted aliens applying for U.S. citizenship; prepared lessons for aliens
Michener (1938)	Greeley, Colorado	s	Transportation	successfully petitioned city council for new regulations regarding bicycles
Wilson (1939)	Ann Arbor, Michigan	s	Recreational and park facilities	petitioned city council; prepared plans for landscaping community parks
	community near New York City	s	City government	campaigned actively for city management form of government
	Ellerby, South Carolina	s	Conservation	assisted Department of Forestry in reforestration project which led to the economic rehabilitation of the community
Johnson (1942)	Eugene, Oregon	s	Traffic safety	organized safety council in school; presented views to city council; worked with police

[a]For a list of social action projects carried out by students in civics classes and school clubs that are not identified by grade level, location, or topic, the reader is referred to Hatch (1923, pp. 153-154).

[b]"s" = secondary school
"e" = elementary school
"c" = slow learner or special class students

[c]In some instances, topics had to be inferred from the action taken.

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Mitchell (1942)	Athens, Ohio	e	Traffic safety	petitioned mayor and Board of Education to reopen street
	Cold Springs; Alabama	s	Health	conducted health survey, constructed toilets conforming to state standards, improved the quality of health in community by encouraging farmers to build similar toilets
	Des Moines, Iowa	s	Municipal government	conducted campaign to inform people of the city manager form of government; conducted "get out and vote" campaign
	Fayette, Alabama	s	Conservation	circulated petitions in community requesting assistance for fire prevention program
	Florence, Alabama	s	Health	compounded rat and insect poisons and distributed them to homes; established malaria control program
	Harlan, Kentucky	s	Health	by assisting medical staff in home visits, delivering medicines, and organizing health clinics, students increased the quality and availability of medical services in their community
	Jayuya, Puerto Rico	s	Health	worked with health department collecting human specimens; organized community meetings to inform about health care

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Mitchell (1942)	Lincoln, Nebraska	e	Conservation	surveyed moth damage to trees; distributed directions to community for eliminating moths
	Lincoln, Nebraska	s	Smoke pollution	presented proposals to Chamber of Commerce for improving the quality of the air in the community; initiated city-wide campaign
	Navoo, Alabama	s	Conservation	organized and trained fire patrols to fight forest fires
	New York City	s	Health	following a survey of health conditions in community, students wrote to city and state officials suggesting ways to improve sanitary conditions
	New York City	s	Housing	worked with parents, community leaders, and housing officials to secure low-cost housing project
	New York City	s	Housing	worked with owners and tenants, the police and the Department of Sanitation to improve slum housing conditions
	New York City	s	Rural poverty	participated in program to improve quality of life in small rural community through use of work camps
	Sitka, Alaska	s	Health	students were responsible for the initiation of a community campaign against tuberculosis

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Mitchell (1942)	Toledo, Ohio	s	Safety	were successful in convincing highway department to pave street
Ward (1942)	Greeley, Colorado	s	Traffic safety	submitted accident survey to city council and police department; reco - mended street lights and signs
	Greeley, Colorado	s	Housing	presented survey of community housing needs to various civic groups
Wilson (1942, pp. 115-120)	Quincy, Illinois	s	Housing	presented survey of community housing needs to mayor and local groups; were responsible for articles in local newspapers
	Radford, Virginia	s	Recreation	conducted survey of recreational needs; petitioned mayor and city council; additional community playgrounds est- ablished as a result
Cutter (1944, pp. 59-62)	Cleveland, Ohio	s/c	Natural resources	following meetings with park landscape architect, students conducted campaign to purchase trees for local park
Telford & Stewart (1947)	Detroit, Michigan	e & s	Recreation	petitioned planning commission; made recreational equipment; supervised playgrounds
Quillen & Hanna (1948, p. 310)	Redwood, California	s	War effort	planned and conducted community scrap drive; worked to establish car pool to conserve gasoline; participated in war bond sales and in USO and Red Cross Drives

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Cobb (1949, p. 43)	Deming, New Mexico	s	Elections	presented talks to local service clubs and at high school assemblies and wrote to members of the state legislature advocating a lowering of the voting age; received excellent coverage in the press
Burr (1950, p. 103)	Brookings, South Dakota	s	Community problems	presented discussions on local radio station
	Renton, Washington	e	Poverty	collected, repaired and distributed toys to children
	Chicago, Illinois	s	Housing	repaired and cleaned several slum dwellings
	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	s	Community services	established and maintained a referral bureau for thirty agencies through which students could volunteer social service work
	LaGrande, Illinois	s	Recreation	established community recreational program
	Holtville, Alabama	s	Economy of community	built frozen food lockers; cannery; and water supply for community; increased average income by $300
Maloff (1950)	New York City	s	Transportation	presented study to Public Service Commission

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Maloff (1950)	Trenton, New Jersey	s	Civil rights	acting on belief that a confession to murder was extracted by force, students urged newspaper to investigate; held assembly at which the defendant's lawyer spoke
Aldrich (1951)	Pearl River, New York	s	Labor problems	held community forum to inform adults on labor-management problems
	Louisville, Kentucky	s	Community	volunteered to participate in community service agencies
Greene (1951)	?	s/c	Community living	wrote letters encouraging people to improve the appearance of their homes and the cleanliness of their yards
	?	s/c	Community living	investigated playground facilities and presented playground director with suggestions for improvement
Matlon (1952)	Edina, Minnesota	s	Voter apathy	organized community campaign to encourage voter registration; distributed handbills; worked in party offices
Beatty (1954)	Grande Rapids, Michigan	e/c	Community studies	letter and visit to mayor requesting additional playground space resulted in increased playground facilities
Adams (1955)	Lynwood, California	s	Voter apathy	conducted "door-to-door" campaign urging people to vote; spoke at community service clubs

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Adams (1955)	Santa Monica, California	s	Civics	conducted meetings with various community groups to present conclusions resulting from investigation of the effects of off-shore drilling on community life
Pitkin (1960, p. 52)	Hartford, Connecticut	s	Education	established driver education program
	Hartford, Connecticut	s	Recreation	petitioned city recreational commission for additional playgrounds
Ellsworth (1963)	?	e	Education	following study of school funding, students prepared and distributed booklet discussing millage and bond issues and describing educational needs of community
Conde-Thillet (1965)	Puerto Rico	?	Community problems	worked with adults on community improvement projects
Sanders (1966, pp. 81-82)	New York City	?	Traffic safety	petitioned city council to make street one-way only
Katlsounis (1971)	?	e	Elections	presented election issues to community groups
	Seattle, Washington	e	Municipal government	conducted community survey to assess attitudes toward selling certain properties for real estate development; organized and conducted public meeting to protest the selling of city properties; event well-covered in news media

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Oliver & Newmann (1972)	Fairfax Co., Virginia	s	Conservation	circulated petition to save forested tract; distributed "fact" sheets throughout community; conducted "door-to-door" campaign; carried signs; petitioned County Board of Supervision
Banks (1974, p. 486, 513)	Seattle, Washington	?	Urban environment	conducted street-cleaning project
	Chicago, Illinois	?	Problems of the inner city	conducted tutoring and recreational programs for inner city youth
"B.C. girl crusades to save whales," (1974)	Tokyo, Japan	e	Conservation	three elementary girls (from Canada, Sweden, and the United States) carried petition with 75,000 signatures to Japan to urge Japanese Government to put a stop to whaling
Newmann (1975, pp. 172-182)	Ann Arbor, Michigan	s	Education	worked as volunteers in enrichment program for black students
	Belle Fourche, South Dakota	s	Conservation	worked on community conservation projects
	El Segundo, California	s	Community services	tutored children in day-care center
	Everett, Washington	s	Community services	participated in volunteer service at community agencies

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Newmann (1975, pp. 172-182)	Iowa City, Iowa	s	Problems of the aged	aided specialists conducting exercise sessions at local retirement home
	Monona, Wisconsin	e	Community services	worked with community agencies
	Moraga, California	s	Conservation	students improved community awareness of environmental problems
	New Haven, Connecticut	?	Community services	established and managed a crisis center for young people
	New York City	s	Drugs	developed a drug treatment program for young people
	New York City	s	Health	assisted Health Department to inform people of the causes, symptoms, and treatment of venereal disease
	New York City	s	Housing	sought to identify housing code violators, informed tenants of their rights
	Northpoint, New York	s	Political rights	participated in the activities of Amnesty International
	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	?	Health	presented lessons on good health practices to elementary school children
	Pico River, California	?	Community services	provided a telephone center for youth seeking advice and assistance

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Newmann (1975, pp. 172-182)	San Francisco, California	?	Urban poor	provided aid for destitute inner-city residents
	St. Paul, Minnesota	?	Public assistance	worked with political action groups, legal aid, and public assistance programs
	Toledo, Ohio	s	Education	tutored children in inner-city school
Buggey (1976)	Maple Oak, Minnesota	e	Traffic safety	worked with police to encourage bicycle safety; petitioned for traffic sign
	Maple Oak, Minnesota	e	Pollution	conducted "clean-up" campaign; displayed posters throughout community
"Burnaby students protest ...." (1976)	Burnaby, British Columbia	e	Traffic safety	marched with placards to oppose plans to build major arterial road in front of elementary school
Welton & Mallen (1976, p. 246)	?	e	Traffic safety	presented a plan of alternative patterns for one-way streets to traffic commissioner; plan adopted by city council
Conrad & Hedin (1977a)	Minneapolis, Minnesota	s	Consumerism	operated a consumer action service for community, mediated disputes

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Conrad & Hedin (1977a)	Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota	s	Health	trained students as health consultants to work in health and school counseling offices
	Westport, Massachusetts	s	Conservation	were responsible for a solarized heating plant in a nature center greenhouse
	midwestern city	s	Conservation	trained and organized elementary and secondary students to identify Dutch Elm Disease
Conrad & Hedin (1977b)	St. Paul, Minnesota	s	Pollution	sought out source of pollution; circulated petitions; elicited legal support; campaigned for enforcement of anti-pollution laws; testified before Pollution Control Agency; offending industry was forced to clean up
Ellis (1977, pp. 245-247)	Melbourne, Florida	e	Consumerism	11-year old girl conducted survey of 1538 children's attitudes towar T.V. advertizing directed at children; appeared before Senate Subcommittee for Consumers
Lopez (1977)	?	e	Poverty	conducted a school-wide food drive to collect food for indigent families

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Reference	Location	School	Problem Topic	Action Taken
Wolfe (1978)	?	pre-school	Sanitation	assisted by teachers and parents, students conducted a survey of litter in the vicinity of their play school; proposed and carried out plans to reduce litter and keep area clean
Curtis (1980)	Vancouver, British Columbia	e	Ecology	conducted neighborhood cleanup campaign; wrote mayor and council to recommend additional recycling centers; wrote managers of local shopping centers to advocate a return to reusable containers

Conclusion

Lately, a number of educators have suggested that social action should be a component of the social studies program. A search of the literature revealed that social action is not a new concept; in fact, during the past 40 years a number of instances of elementary and secondary students attempting to influence the social environment have been reported. The purpose of this paper was to present a rationale for social action, describe social action models, and assemble and report instances of social action by public school students.

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